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Storying The Gospel To M's

The Nature of the Problem

While radio broadcasts and other mass media have produced a sporadic response, primarily from younger better-educated M's, they generally failed to hold the M's attention long enough to establish a hearing. What was needed was a method that is more culturally appropriate and less openly confrontative. The M's fragmented and limited knowledge of biblical things is a poor foundation for presenting Christ as Savior. In many places the people practice folk religion, with a liberal sprinkling of animism, but there is still great resistance to Gospel "preaching." So how does one communicate the message without "preaching."

Enter the Chronological Approach Using Bible Stories

The chronological approach has been popularized in recent years in the Philippines by Trevor McIlwain of the New Tribes Mission. It was developed in response to the fact that many tribal peoples have a poor foundation for receiving the New Testament Gospel. Beginning with Genesis, McIlwain set out from the Old Testament to lay a foundation for New Testament teaching on the nature of God, the sin problem, and God's plan to remedy the broken relationship through His Son, and raise up a people to His name.

The method was picked up by others in the Philippines who also began to use discrete Bible stories, as opposed to expositional teaching. In our program, we try to cover the Bible in about a two-year cycle, with 85-90 lessons that span from creation to judgment. This varies due to many factors that may require additional stories to help overcome spiritual or cultural barriers. Our main departure from McIlwain's approach is to use stories exclusively in the beginning, and then as people are attracted to the presentations to begin to expand the teaching to a more expositional method like that of McIlwain. Later Bible story lesson cycles fill in the gaps and expand themes and doctrines needed for maturing a people in Christ.

The stories have great appeal to the illiterate and are immediately retellable, even by children. The approach highlights themes which run through many stories, and build up a sense of anticipation of what will happen next. It was discovered that the stories were well received culturally even when they contradicted local culture. The historical threads together with the doctrinal themes which ran from one story to another, have had a powerful effect. Another reason for using the stories is the low level of theological education of many of the local workers.

In 1988 an attempt was made to introduce the chronological approach to another country with an M presence. The attempt failed. Upon examination, it was discovered that the selection of stories and themes taken from the model set of stories, which were designed for a Christo-pagan culture, were inappropriate in that setting. Later that year a request came from Bangladesh to introduce the method there for use in tribal areas and among Hindu village people. After an initial round of training, workers went out to teach. The tribal people began responding and have continued to respond, and a number of churches were planted as a result.

We began to realize the value of the approach for reaching Ms when they would drift into Hindu groups being taught in the villages, became interested, and came back to hear more. There are always Ms living in Hindu villages, and, typically, anything that happens in a small village is public knowledge. Disturbances were often created by those who opposed the preaching of the Christian gospel. But because this is not preaching and is communicated in an entertaining and culturally appropriate manner,

and because it deals with material they know something about already - especially the stories about the prophets - they stay with it.

Meanwhile missionaries had learned to tailor the chronological presentation of the gospel to the spiritual worldview of the Ms among whom they minister. Their beliefs are significantly different from those of Christo-pagans, Hindus and animists. It was found that the stories of the prophets had to be expanded in order to draw out important doctrinal themes as an early foundation. Another feature was the strictly historical chronological presentation of the biblical revelation; Jesus was not mentioned by name until the angel said "His name shall be Jesus." The number of stories used was determined by the identified spiritual barriers, the redemptive analogies and bridges that already existed, and the doctrinal foundation that was needed to prepare a people for Gospel.

I would not call this a "sure fire method" or a shortcut to evangelizing difficult people. We have, however, found it to be of great value in approaching target groups who have been resistant to traditional approaches to evangelization. We let the continuity of the story and the Holy Spirit convince the hearers that it is true, even though it conflicts with what they have previously been taught. We are discovering the insatiable curiosity that Ms have about certain doctrinal issues and concepts. For example, they love the *Characteristics of God* teaching tool that we use. We dwell on God's promises which He always keeps, and his "predictableness" in that He always acts according to His nature and His Word.

Chronological Bible Storying Provides a "Soft" Message

It was discovered that the method is "soft" in that it does not provoke open and violent confrontation between the message of the Bible and existing beliefs of Ms. During the presentation there is a review of earlier stories which give background or the foundation for the current story. Some questions are asked to stimulate interest in themes to be discovered in the new story. A short portion of the story is read from the Bible to anchor it in the Bible. The story is told in a culturally appropriate manner with some discretion as to its length and the details that are included. Among illiterate people the idea is to convey an "oral Bible" of memorable and retellable stories. Finally, a dialog or discussion time follows in which people are invited to comment on the story.

This is a "soft" inductive time in which many wrong answers may be received, especially in the beginning. When a wrong answer is received the leader tactfully asks if someone else might have another opinion. Or he may choose to retell the story, or recall another, in order to bring out the right answer. It is insisted that leaders establish community with their hearers, and develop a desire in them to hear more. The stories used for evangelizing range from the pre-creation period (God the self-sufficient One, creation of the spirit world and rebellion of Satan) to the ascension of Jesus after completing His work of redemption. A review of the story lessons points out how Jesus satisfied in every way God's righteous and holy requirements by atoning for sin.

The method was taken to Africa by Southern Baptists, although a form of the chronological method was already in use by others in East Africa. It has had a particular appeal to the M migratory peoples of Africa. One early test case was with an M village in Burkina Faso where the people began to respond after a year of storying the gospel. It is now being used with the Fulani people in West Africa, as well as with some of the Tuaregs of East Africa. In Bangladesh, the method is used primarily with tribal and Hindu communities, but open invitations are given to Ms living among them. It has been introduced to Indonesia, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Thailand.

A set of large color pictures was developed for teaching these stories among tribal peoples in the Philippines. Generally speaking it is not advisable to use these pictures with M audiences. In some areas where folk religion is widespread, all but the creation pictures featuring Adam and Eve may be

used with discretion. Other pictures pose cultural as well as other problems for Ms. In such areas, it was found that impromptu dramas and songs are better used to illustrate stories than the pictures.

A great concern in Africa is the suggestion that African Ms remain illiterate like the Prophet. This means that an oral approach must be used for witness and church planting, as well as for discipling, and for equipping the Christians to continue the evangelization process among their own people. The new opportunities we have had for establishing community with Ms through sharing these stories which they love with other targeted peoples has encouraged missionaries not to neglect the Ms.

(For a fuller explanation of the concepts of the chronological Bible storying approach, and of developing materials for local use, and for other sources of information and materials, write the author.)

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I wrote the author. Below is the text of his reply, dated 22/3/94. He is BFMB Media Consultant for Asia & the Pacific.

Dear Rick,

Return greetings from Singapore. Your letter arrived this afternoon. I am about to decide I really blew it by not attending that conference in January. Someone said it became a conference joke about whether I really existed or not. Jim had asked me about helping him but I already had a full month in Pakistan planned with four storying conferences there. So there was no way I could break that. And I'm sure he did fine without me.

You mentioned the SEEDBED article. It was general on purpose. I felt that we did need to share with others what we were discovering for ourselves in our own work with Ms. I did not want the article to sound too authoritative as we are new in this ministry and the Ms we deal with are quite different from some of those in the Middle East. Basically what I was saying is that we share so much in common with our M brothers in the Old Testament stories, and we have found that in this part of the world they love the stories and will hear them where they turn off when we preach to them. So we have deliberately tailored the approach to keep it oral as possible and to keep it soft as possible so they will stay with us hopefully to the gospel.

Since you read SEEDBED you probably noticed the fine article by Dubby Rodda in Vol VII, No. 4 (1992) titled "Sharing the Gospel with Ms: A Chronological Approach." In his model Dubby mentioned the Emmaus Road encounter of Christ with the two disciples and makes the comparison of where the Jews were in their understanding of Jesus' death as compared to where the Ms are in his country of Senegal. Dubby does an excellent job of outlining the criteria for choosing appropriate stories and does list a set along with a prioritizing system he worked out. It is an excellent piece. In fact, it was so well done that I have written to Dubby to ask if we could use it as a "shell model." I'll explain that term in a moment. So I have titled the model the "EMMAUS ROAD" model. We have several others sort of coming together at the moment and hope to have in a sharable form after some more field testing.

A shell model is a storying set which is just a shell or outline without the stories being fully fleshed or the story sessions fully planned out. So it (is) really more of a starter than a complete package ready to begin using. There is a deliberate purpose in doing this also. We've had a number of people who have jumped into the chronological Bible storying approach by grabbing up someone else's materials and using them without any thought as to why certain stories were being used or what themes needed to be brought up in the stories for discussion afterwards. This really began to happen when materials coming out of the Philippine Christo-pagan world view were used indiscriminately. It was at this point I realized the importance of taking some time to go over the foundational doctrines for a particular people

and the world view issues we needed to confront either during the evangelism track or later in the characterization track in the Epistles.

So in my workshops with missionaries where we go to really work we build a world view construct and then try to state the implications as bridges and barriers that we can write objectives for. I don't know how much of this Jim covered in my absence. I usually have a session or two on this since it is so important. The objective is to arrive at a set of teaching objectives (or witnessing objectives) which can serve as criteria for selecting stories and themes to cover. Typically we aim for around 12-15 which seem to be sufficient. And since we are going to choose anywhere from 3-5 stories which speak to each objective, it gives us a rule of thumb for how much to attempt covering in the time frame we feel is available to us. And as the target population is more resistant to the gospel it is often necessary to spend the extra time in more stories which hint at and which teach more directly the themes we need to cover. In one story set from Bangladesh the trainer there and his co-worker chose 62 stories. That is a bit much but it was the list which they felt best spoke to the world view of their M village people.

There we had to include some stories which dealt with persecution like Daniel since there was fear of persecution if they changed their religion. With some of our Chinese target peoples we have to really spend time in the Creation stories to be sure the Bible creation stories are given enough "weight." Then we have to cover lots of "sin" stories since Chinese do not consider themselves sinful. Their religion is basically one of obtaining prosperity and good luck in their business dealings. So it is a totally alien world view we must deal with.

Back to your question with Ms in your area. I can't speak with any authority about your area. Around here where I live we have Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis and "folk Ms" of all varieties along with M-Hindus, M-animists, and even M-Buddhists if you can imagine such a combination in southern Thailand where Buddhism meets the M religion of Malaysia. In Bangladesh we have M husbands with "Hindu" M wives. For all the men know their wives are M and the women will tell you they are. But in practice they go to Hindu "power points" to get their needs met while outwardly paying lip-service to the M religion.

Now to get a headstart in working with some of these groups we are working on several shell models like the EMMAUS ROAD model. In Indonesia it looks like one dealing with the "WORD" or "FIRMAN" in Indonesia is a powerful approach. So we look for stories that demonstrate the power of God's Word, the surety of God's Word, the unchangeableness of God's Word and finally the full expression of God's Word in Christ. This looks very promising among the Sundanese of West Java. Only time will tell as we continue to refine it. In peninsular Malaysia we have a strong conservative fundamentalist element that is pushing for sharia law throughout the land. There seems to be an openness to discuss the Kingdom of God as the rule of God with man under God's law. Of course, the Ms believe that simply knowing the law is salvation in itself. And so we add themes of breaking the law of God and the consequences. And we add stories to show that even the prophets were not able to keep God's law and to fully obey His Word. This shell model is headed toward the failure of an earthly kingdom and a need for a King of Kings whose kingdom is not of this world. For this model you need to jump on to the End Times to pick up the coming in fullness of that kingdom.

Another model looks at the EXALTED or ACCEPTABLE SACRIFICE which was required to cover man's sin. So the story set is driven by a sacrifice theme which has to be carried on to Hebrews to complete and which requires thorough coverage of the sacrifices and the failure of the sacrifice system as a ritual not coupled with man's obedience to God's Word.

We are looking at a GOD AND WOMAN model which would be more sensitive to the world view of a typical village woman who is illiterate, under almost total control of her husband, who has certain mystical knowledge related to her women's group which excludes men, and who often practices a

religion quite different from her husband. It would of necessity include more stories of women who had significant roles to show that God loved both man and woman. It would focus more on the intimate family relationships that a woman would want to know about. It would be more relationship driven than theology or doctrine driven. And yet it would also cover the need for a redeemer who would fulfill the promise made in the Garden of Eden for a descendant of woman to crush the head of the serpent.

If it is a matter of how to tell the stories I could send you some samples of stories as they have been paraphrased by others. One good source of storytelling method is the paperback from Tyndale House titled THE STORY. It is an edited chronological narrative Bible in which the narrative from Adam to Armageddon is kept flowing smoothly. It clearly illustrates the Bible as a narrative sequence and integrates the kingdom accounts with the prophets, the four gospels, and Acts with the epistles. The cost is only about \$6 or so.

I know that the storying method has been used in Papua New Guinea in several places - the Ee-taow story and the Bisorio story come from area. It is being used in Thailand by New Tribes and other groups. The Marburger Mission is using a timeline presentation which they had printed in Thailand. We also use timeline presentations in some urban settings but prefer the stories in rural and highly resistant areas. You might try writing to New Tribes Office in Sanford, FL, and I am sure they can direct you to some other users. Trevor McIlwain always mentions a number of these when he conducts a conference.

One thing that is important in putting together your stories for use with Ms is to pay close attention to themes which link stories together so it is difficult for them to misinterpret what is happening in the story. Also it is important to provide bridging stories and summary bridging comments so that there is obvious continuity between stories. One of the strengths of the Bible is its coherence in spite of its diversity of authors and times when it was compiled. And we want to preserve that coherence as much as we can so that stories interpret stories. This is in contrast to many of the stories Ms have about the prophets which they have heard but which have little or no coherence from story to story. Did Jim get into any of the theory or method of building your individual stories? Usually we cover this in the session on preparing your stories.

You'll find that some who use the chronological teaching approach take a more empirical view of the content of the story lessons in that they simply decide what they feel needs to be taught from primarily a doctrinal point of view. In practice then they respond to questions and lack of proper response to their lessons and make changes. Also there is a school of thought that follows more of an expositional approach in which the leaders simply teach the material - point by point or however. Jim and I favor a more oral narrative in which the truth is in the story and is highlighted by what we review before the new story lesson and in some discussion questions we may choose to ask during the dialog time.

I hope you will not see this as putting you off. Guess I am looking for a bit more information to get a handle on your need. Again, we are still learning ourselves. We owe a debt of gratitude to New Tribes Mission and certain of their people who shared with us. We'll continue to share with others as we learn how to use this powerful tool for witness and discipleship.

Sincerely,
J. O. Terry